

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
CTWR 250: BREAKING THE STORY
Spring 2024 Section number 19360D
Mondays, 10-12:50pm SCA 258

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Office hours: Before/after class, Monday 1-4
(**best by appointment**, set up by email)
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CLASS OBJECTIVE: A successful screenwriting career is built on the craft of storytelling which in turn depends on the writer's ability to generate and elaborate upon worthwhile ideas. This course is designed to help you develop your skills by approaching story ideation and creation from a variety of angles and by assisting you in developing your own personal process for "finding" ideas and stories. By the end of the semester you will create and develop several feature and series ideas and collect them in a well-organized portfolio. In the future you will have a chance to develop some of the material generated in this class further, both in subsequent classes in the School of Cinematic Arts and as you pursue your profession as a screenwriter in any media.

CLASS GOALS:

- To learn how to develop compelling characters, the source of all stories.
- To explore and develop the story-breaking process.
- To acquire the ability to develop stories quickly.
- To exercise imaginative skills and discover hidden sources to tap into.
- To develop strong verbal as well as written storytelling skills.
- To create a personal connection between you and your work.
- To build a strong and varied portfolio of material for future use.

CLASS SCHEDULE: The class will be given weekly assignments that involve creating and breaking stories from a variety of starting points. These assignments will be accompanied by lecture and class discussion, then completed in differing ways: individually, in teams, in class and at home.

WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS:

Part One: Personal Stories

Week 1: 1/8 – *Where do we find stories?*

- Discuss class expectations, deadlines and syllabus
- How do you find your stories? Experience, learning, imagination....and craft
- IN-CLASS: anecdotes about a childhood birthday party – yours or friend's
- Natural storytelling...set up circumstances, collision/events, impact, aftermath

- What can we push, expand, heighten, strengthen....make more dramatic
- FOR NEXT CLASS: Bring in a story from your “family lore”you or someone in the family, a story often told or told in confidence, one that resonates for you. Write in three paragraphs (about a page)...prepare to present verbally.
 - What is special about it? Why do you tell it?
 - Who is the main character and why we care about them?
 - Beginning, middle and end of the story.
- Homework: Screen and Read: *Lady Bird*

Week 2: 1/15 – NO CLASS – Martin Luther King’s Birthday

Week 3: 1/22 – *Memory Stories*

- Discuss your “family lore” story. How do we create compelling stories from life? Is there a feature film here? Or is there a television series? A podcast? A short?
- FOR NEXT CLASS: write (for verbal presentation) about your greatest fear (now or in childhood) or greatest fantasy (now or then)...make it visceral
- Homework: Screen *Parasite*

Week 4: 1/29 – *Greatest fear or fantasy stories*

- Discuss greatest fear/fantasy (what scares you the most/what power would you die to have?) Who is your main character? Can you describe their moment (the exact scene) of greatest fear or fantasy? How to build to that moment?
- IN-CLASS: break into pairs and create a pitch for both partners’ favorite fear or fantasy story...
- FOR NEXT CLASS: bring in something that makes you angry (can be personal or political or social) try to find the scene where that anger explodes
- Homework: screen *Dopesick* or *Erin Brockavich* or *Michael Clayton*

Week 5: 2/5 – *Writing from emotion to character*

- Discuss the thing that makes you angry. Is there a story there? A character?
- FOR NEXT CLASS: create three groups of three to meet outside class. Bring in three pitches for story episodes of a family sitcom: *Blackish*, *Modern Family*, *The Simpsons*, *Broad City*, *Fleabag*, etc. (We will vote on the shows and assign them in class.)
- **TO HAND IN:** Rewrite a two-page pitch of one of your previous stories: your fear/fantasy assignment, your anger assignment, or your memory story

Week 6: 2/12 – *Writing Family Sitcom pitches*

- **HAND IN:** your two page pitch of one of your stories
- Pitch and discuss sitcoms. Vote on the episode that gets picked up.
- Discuss that sitcoms are always family (of some kind, even workplace)

- FOR NEXT CLASS: world building – photo essays (power point) of a world you would like to use for a story. Discuss *True Detective*, *Ladybird*, *Parasite*, *Friday Night Lights* and how these shows/films rely on a sense of place.
- Homework: screen *Ford v Ferrari* or *The Crown*

Week 7: 2/19 NO CLASS – President's Day

Part Two: Using Genre to challenge your character and shape your story

Week 8: 2/26 – Writing from place

- Present your world to class via powerpoint/keynote with music if you like. Discuss ways to find a story for it. Is there a character who is an outgrowth of your particular place or a guide through it? Where is the conflict?!
- Discuss genre and how it helps shape a story and challenge your character.
- FOR NEXT CLASS: write a supernatural or horror-story pitch. (Can be a *Black Mirror Episode* or other short or series idea or a feature pitch.) Concentrate on character and WHY the story happens to them.
- **TO HAND IN: Midterm Project.** Chose one of your pitches and develop it into a 5 page synopsis: a short pitch/teaser, description of the main character and then tell us the story, beginning-middle-resolution (acts 1-2-3.)

Week 9: 3/4 – The Supernatural/Horror Story

- **HAND IN:** Midterm project
- Pitch and discuss your supernatural or horror stories. Who is the main character and why do we care? How are we made to believe in the story?
- IN-CLASS: Pair up and develop/combine/expand horror stories together
- FOR NEXT CLASS: Create a Trip With Destination (Road Trip) pitch.
- Homework: screen *1917*

Week 8: 3/11 NO CLASS – Spring Break

Week 10: 3/18 – Road Trip

THIS CLASS WILL BE ON ZOOM – I HAVE TO BE OUT OF TOWN

- Discuss Road Trip pitches.
- Discuss anecdotal stories, over-arching goals, use of locations and added cast
- No preparation needed for next class...so work on your portfolio

Week 11: 3/25 – Writing for an Actor

- IN-CLASS: put actors' names in a hat. Put locations/worlds in a hat. Put genre in a hat. Teams pick and use the class to create a feature story for the actor/place.
- FOR NEXT CLASS: Create a character (biography) who is unable to love.
- Homework: screen *Knives Out* or *War of the Roses* or *As Good as it Gets*

Week 12: 4/1 *Rom-Com (Love story)*

- Present character who is unable to love. What is their NEED?
- IN-CLASS: in groups find a perfect foil for that character. (A character MOST able to love or most able to crack the other's inability....a catalyst character)
- How to make comedy out of this material? Is the love with the catalyst?
- **TO HAND IN:** write a rom-com pitch (2 pages) How do they meet? What is the conflict? How does location help inform the story? How does it end? Is the character compelling enough? Is his/her need fulfilled?
- FOR NEXT CLASS: In teams pitch 2 episodes of a detective series, procedural, hospital drama, HBO series or historical drama (examples to be decided in class).

Week 13: 4/8 – *One-hour episodic: Detective, Hospital, Procedural Pitches*

- **HAND IN:** 2 page rom-com pitch.
- IN-CLASS: Teams pitch episodes for one-hour series. Vote on winning episode that gets picked up.
- FOR NEXT CLASS: find a myth or character from classical literature that is interesting to you and could inspire a story.

Part Three: Finding stories in myth, legend or existing material

Week 14: 4/15 - *Writing from Existing Material: Myth and Legend*

- Discuss and workshop mythical character/story and story possibilities.
- FOR NEXT CLASS: Bring in a biography story. (*This assignment will be given earlier in the semester to give you time to do some research.)
- Homework: screen *Theory of Everything* or *Hidden Figures* or *Black Messiah*

Week 15: 4/22 – *Writing from Existing Material: The Biopic*

- Discuss your biography pitches. Is the character compelling enough to carry a feature and interest an actor? Are there enough obstacles? How does the world of the character help? Genre?
- FINAL PROJECT: organize your portfolio of all stories created. Include pertinent and helpful feedback and “what if” ideas for future use. Due May 3rd noon.

MAY 1st, NOON – FINAL PORTFOLIO (IN SINGLE PDF) IS DUE:

EVALUATION CRITERIA

CNTV 250 grades will be based on careful consideration in the following areas of the students' work:

1. The ability to keep up with the writing required in the course's schedule.
2. The ability to generate compelling characters and ideas for cinema and television.
3. Demonstrated understanding of how to workshop and develop ideas into stories.
4. The ability to develop a feature/pilot synopsis.
5. The ability to work collaboratively with other writers/creators.

GRADING WEIGHTS

CNTV 250 grades are based on:

- Weekly Writing Assignments 30%
- Midsemester Synopsis 10%
- Two rewritten pitches 10%
- Reading and responding to classmates' work 10%
- Final, overall portfolio of collected work 40%

An "A" is for truly exceptional work; a "B" is for good work; and a "C" is for average work. Simply completing the assigned work is, in and of itself, no guarantee of a high grade.

Per Writing Division policy, the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:

A	100% to 94%	C	76% to 73%
A-	93% to 90%	C-	72% to 70%
B+	89% to 87%	D+	69% to 67%
B	86% to 83%	D	66% to 63%
B-	82% to 80%	D-	62% to 60%
C+	79% to 77%	F	59% to 0%

Please note that you must receive a grade of a C or better in order to receive degree credit.

EXPECTATION OF PROFESSIONALISM:

Filmmakers collaborate. Professional filmmakers collaborate professionally, which in our class means participating respectfully and delivering work punctually. All material is expected to be turned in on time and in the proper format. Assignments will be penalized for grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, format mistakes, and typos. Please proof-read your assignment prior to submission.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Class attendance is mandatory, and students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Tardiness is unprofessional and will hold up the business of the class. Be on time.

Two late arrivals equal one full absence. Two unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered by a half grade point (Ex. A to A-) Any further unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered another two thirds of a point (ex: B to a C+) for each absence.

If you have a conflict that will cause you to miss class, you need to secure the instructor's approval of that absence in advance of the class. Excused absences can include, but are not limited to: illness, both physical and mental; death of a loved one; personal emergency; sporting events (for Student-Athletes) or other university-sponsored activities; religious holidays, and so on. In addition, due to current Covid protocols, if you are feeling ill, without time to test before class, please notify your instructor, do not attend class and get a test. If you test positive, inform your instructor and quarantine for the Health Department's designated period of time.

If you miss class without informing your instructor, it will be considered an unexcused absence. Unexcused absences can lower your final grade for the course. If you find you must miss class due to personal emergency or personal crisis, please contact your professor as soon as possible so they can assist you in finding the appropriate University care and guidance. Your health and well-being are of utmost importance to the Wells Writing Division and to your faculty.

LAPTOP AND CELLPHONE POLICY

As this is a seminar, we want to be in conversation with each other, not with people, places, things outside the classroom. Hence: no open laptops, no tablets, phones or smartphones in use during class time. If you want to take notes, use paper.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Diversity and Inclusion are foundational to the SCA community. We are committed to fostering a welcoming and supportive environment where students of all identities and backgrounds can flourish. The classroom should be a space for open discussion of ideas and self-expression; however, SCA will not tolerate verbal or written abuse, threats, harassment, intimidation or violence against person or property. If students are concerned about these matters in the classroom setting, they are encouraged to contact their SCA Diversity and Inclusion Liaison, <http://cinema.usc.edu/about/diversity.cfm>; e-mail diversity@cinema.usc.edu. You can also report discrimination based on a protected class here <https://equity.usc.edu/harassment-or-discrimination/>

DISRUPTIVE STUDENT BEHAVIOR

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students' ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is in contrast to the university's mission to educate students through a broad array of first-rank academic, professional, and extracurricular programs and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form).

This course will follow the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the [USC Student Handbook](#). All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of engaging in academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Other violations of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see the [student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE:

The uses of generative Artificial Intelligence to create narrative continue to evolve throughout the media workplace. However, it is vital that before relying on AI to assist in aspects of storytelling that we learn to source and execute our work via our own unique imagination.

Creative, analytical, and critical thinking skills are part of the learning outcomes of this course. All assignments should be prepared by the student working individually. Students may not have another person or entity complete any substantive portion of the assignment. Developing strong competencies in these areas will prepare you for a competitive workplace. Therefore, using AI-generated tools is prohibited in this course, will be identified as plagiarism, and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

COURSE CONTENT DISTRIBUTION AND SYNCHRONOUS SESSION RECORDINGS POLICIES

USC has policies that prohibit recording and distribution of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment.

Recording a university class without the express permission of the instructor and announcement to the class, or unless conducted pursuant to an Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) accommodation. Recording can inhibit free discussion in the future, and thus infringe on the academic freedom of other students as well as the instructor. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Distribution or use of notes, recordings, exams, or other intellectual property, based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study. This includes but is not limited to providing materials for distribution by services publishing course materials. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the internet, or via any other media. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

COURSE EVALUATIONS

Course evaluation occurs at the end of the semester university-wide. It is an important review of students' experience in the class. The process and intent of the end-of-semester evaluation should be provided. In addition, a [mid-semester evaluation](#) is recommended practice for early course correction.

STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC CONDUCT AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment, or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

STUDENTS AND DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. [The Office of Student Accessibility Services](#) (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

[Counseling and Mental Health](#) - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

[988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

[Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services \(RSVP\)](#) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

[Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX\)](#) - (213) 740-5086

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

[Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment](#) - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

[The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

[USC Campus Support and Intervention](#) - (213) 740-0411

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) - (213) 740-2101

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

[USC Emergency](#) - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

[USC Department of Public Safety](#) - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call

Non-emergency assistance or information.

[Office of the Ombuds](#) - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

[Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice](#) - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS/COURSE CONTINUITY IN A CRISIS:

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.

Please activate your course in Brightspace with access to the course syllabus. Whether or not you use Brightspace regularly, these preparations will be crucial in an emergency. USC's Brightspace learning management system and support information is available at <https://www.brightspacehelp.usc.edu/>

PLEASE NOTE:

FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX.